

“Not Ashamed of Our Brothers and Sisters”

For the person who makes people holy and those who are made holy are all one. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, nor are we ashamed to call one another brothers and sisters in the Lord.

The world is shrinking - it is a cliché, but true. Even here in Bakersfield we mingle with people from far parts of the globe: Philippines, Nigeria, Ghana, India, Tonga, Taiwan, China, Japan, Britain, Canada, Mexico and Central America; even Oklahoma and Texas. One of the wonderful things about our Christian faith is that we are united together across our national and cultural boundaries.

Early Church Challenges and Ours

Early Christian congregations also experienced ethnic and linguistic differences. There were Hebrew and Aramaic speaking Christians, then Greek speaking, and probably among the latter, those who spoke numerous other languages. Some of the challenges they faced are not so different from ours and instructive to our situation. This letter to the Hebrews, was written to Christians who were familiar with the Greek version of the Old Testament and many of the Jewish traditions. They could have been Greek-speaking Jewish converts, or second generation Christians. They are confronted with challenges - some are falling away from the faith, some have grown lax in attendance, and commitment is waning (see 4:14; 12:12-13; 12:25; 10:28-29). Have you heard about Christianity in America? A recent survey showed that 66% of adult Americans identify themselves as Christians, but are lax in beliefs and practices.¹ Could that be any among us?

The delay of the final return of Christ may have disillusioned and discouraged some believers to whom this letter was written. How many of us sometimes wonder how long must we go on being faithful without some dramatic action of God, or something great happening? How often have you wished God would hurry up and answer a prayer?

There is indication in the letter that some members had been imprisoned or suffered confiscation of their property (10:34). Though they had not yet shed blood for their faith (12:4), the writer uses the words “persecution” (10:33), “hostility” (12:3), and “torture” (13:3). The believers also suffered public abuse and ridicule (Heb 10:33). Honor and shame were important values in the ancient Mediterranean cultures, and these poor Christians were ridiculed for following one who endured the shame of the cross (12:2).

These Christians needed an understanding of who Jesus was and is that gave them a fuller and better grasp of his power in their present situation. Perhaps the believers had a view of Christ that did not fit their context. Maybe their view of Christ was long on divinity, but short on humanity. They had no way to fit the flesh and blood, lower than angels, tempted, crying and praying, suffering and dying Jesus with God’s larger plan of redemption. Maybe their view of Christ ended with the exaltation and enthronement of the Son, but offered no good news of his continuing ministry of intercession for believers. The writer sees that this crisis of faith cannot be met with improved structures or social strategies, but with more a complete understanding of who Christ really is.

And so he tells his readers that...

¹George Barna, “America’s Critical Moment,” Sept. 25, 2009, ChristianityToday.com

Worthy to Be Author of Salvation

God speaks - never so loudly that every casual passerby hears, but God speaks nonetheless. [God's self-revelation is the foundation of Judaism and Christianity.] Creation is one medium for God's revelation (both Old and New Testaments affirm this). Yet, if God does not speak to us, we would have only a vague yearning for God, and a hunger not satisfied by a succession of sunsets and songbirds. God's revelation is more clearly carried by persons, relationships, and events.

God speaks. God spoke in the past, and in these last days; that is, the days of the messiah, Jesus. God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets, and now has spoken to us by his Son. This Son holds a position of favor with God; for "after he had made purification for sins..." meaning atonement on the cross, he sat at God's right hand. His position is greater than that of all the angels. Jesus, the radiance of God's glory, is a true representative of the Father, and has acted as his agent and spoken with the authority of the Father.

God gave sovereignty not to the angels, but to One who was made a little lower than angels for a time. The writer of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 8 (vs. 5-6) [*Read the psalm*], interpreting it in reference to Christ, but not in a way that violates its original meaning. The psalmist looks at the starry sky and the beauty of creation, and yet extols the wonder of human life. God intended for humanity to be crowned with glory and honor. The psalm sings of human life as little lower than angels, holding dominion over all other creatures. That description of the human estate is what causes the writer to say, "Yes, this is who Jesus is: lower than angels for awhile, crowned with glory and honor and all things subject to him." Sadly, sin and death have entered the world, marring the glory of humans and God's high aspirations for humans still await completion. Else why would God send Jesus for us and for our salvation?

Though we do not yet see God's plans for humanity fulfilled, we do see Jesus. He is crowned with glory and honor (exaltation) precisely because he suffered death on the cross. In his dying, Jesus tasted death for everyone. There was some embarrassment among ancients concerning Jesus' suffering and death and no doubt those early Christians were mocked for their faith in him. Have you ever been mocked for your faith in Christ's saving grace on the cross? [Not here in Bakersfield, but in my previous place of residence, I was. "How can intelligent man like your believe such a thing? It's preposterous!" one acquaintance said to me.] The ancients believed that an exalted ruler should overcome all and everything. Yet it is this very point of shame that is the central piece of God's plan of redemption. If they - the readers of this letter - prefer passionless angels over a suffering Jesus, the writer of Hebrews tells them (and us) otherwise.

During that "little while" that Jesus was a little lower than the angels the whole drama of our redemption from sin and death was played out. What happened during the little while of Christ's incarnation was no accident, no coincidence; it all happened at God's initiative. Honor and glory belong to Jesus, but now, because of his full identification with humanity during his incarnation and atoning death on the cross, many others will share in that glory. For this work of salvation Jesus was made "perfect" through suffering. Perfect refers to completeness of his preparation for his ministry. If his life had not included suffering and death, it would not have been fully human. Anything less would have kept him from a full understanding and identification with the human condition. Anything less would have been no use to our salvation, and not brought us to honor and glory.

He is called the "pioneer" of our salvation. Here, in Hebrews is a rare use of the word **αρχηγος** meaning founder, originator. The word combines the idea of divine author and human leader. Jesus is the one who

in himself creates the path for his followers (see 12:2). [Similar to John's "I am the way, the truth, and the life."] Christ is the pioneer of our faith, the one who goes before us not only showing the way but also creating the path in himself. Christ is our champion, defeating the devil and setting us free from the fear of death. Christ is our high priest, offering sacrifice of atonement for our sins. Christ is our representative before God, our advocate, intercessor for all who are being put to the test. Christ is our avenue to glory. "For us and for our salvation" runs through this section of Hebrews like a mighty refrain.

Brother & Sisters of Christ

In Old Testament God is the one who sanctifies (Exodus 31:13; Lev. 20:8; Ezek. 20:12). To sanctify means to make worthy - as were the priests of ancient Israel - to stand in the holy of holies (in the Temple), that is, in God's holy presence. In the letter to the Hebrews the one who sanctifies is Jesus, who is the radiance of God and speaks with God's authority. Since the incarnation and its sufferings are appropriate to God's purpose, and that purpose is to lead many to glory (i.e. into God's glorious presence), Jesus is not ashamed to be identified with us - even to call us brothers and sisters. The unity of the one who sanctifies and the sanctified is the message here. His "for a little while" is not an embarrassment to God, or to himself, or the church, but a necessary and worthy action for divine purposes and for our salvation.

Now being Christ's brother or sister has been misunderstood on two extremes. In the first instance we know what we are like, and certainly know what a lot of other people are like, and so we hesitate to admit him to our ranks. How could he, who is the very radiance of God, be counted among our sinful ranks? We so emphasize his divinity as to cut him off from our humanity. Are there people you are embarrassed to be identified with? Probably, yes, and for good reason. It is always a challenge to befriend unbelievers who are lost, whose lives are headed down the wrong path. We don't want to be drawn down that path as well. Yet how can we share the wonderful purpose of God in Jesus unless we are in a position to introduce him to others?

The other extreme is to misunderstand his humanity in a way that neglects who he really is: the one and only Son of the living God. We can either become so chummy with him, or so identify with his human traits, that we see him mostly as an exemplary social reformer, rather than the One who can take away the sins of all. In this way we often overlook our sins and our need for his divine grace.

Jesus Unites Us All

Jesus has been portrayed in art around the world with a visage indigenous to each and every people who know him as Savior. He identifies, in his suffering and death, with *all* people who come to him, and his atoning death brings all who cling to him into the mighty presence of God's glory.

Clinging to *him*: that's the key to unity. We don't come here to celebrate diversity. Diversity is often superficial, and often distracting from our true purpose. No, we come here to celebrate our unity in Christ. That's something worth celebrating. Yes, we have differences. Our native tongues may be diverse, our cultural background diverse, but those are human differences. What brings us together, what bridges all those differences, is our commitment to Christ. And if you haven't yet committed your life to him, do so today. [Take time in prayer at the rail to receive him for the first time or to renew your commitment to him.]

Come today to His table and be unified with all the true disciples of Jesus, for He desires to bring many sons and daughters to glory.

From around the globe we are gathered to him and committed to him. From within this place He will send us into our community and to the far corners of the globe, to gather in those who will be called sons and daughters of the living God, and our brothers and sisters in Christ.